

Exploring Farm to School:

Facilitator's Guide to Implementation in Arizona



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This document is dedicated to the beautiful children of St. John School.

Your giving spirits inspire me to continue to work to end hunger.



Farm to School would not have been possible without the guidance of the following people:

Aileen Carr, Congressional Hunger Center; Varga Garland, Community Food Bank's Community Food Security Center; the staff of the Community Food Bank and Community Food Center; Mary Barbosa and Lupita Ornelas, St. John the Evangelist School; Cindy Gentry, Community Food Connections; Le Adams, Farm to Table New Mexico; farmers of Arizona; and the 180 wonderful children of St. John School.

As a National Hunger Fellow, my role was to explore the barriers and opportunities to implementing Farm to School programs in elementary schools and childcare centers in Tucson, Arizona. My exploration of Farm to School culminated with St. John the Evangelist School's "Eat Well, Be Well" Health Week. This guide is not an exhaustive resource and is meant to complement existing Farm to School guides. ~ Amber Herman, National Hunger Fellow

The pictures in this report were taken by Amber Herman and Community Food Bank staff during St. John School Health Week, January 14-18, 2008.

Poverty in Arizona and Tucson

Nestled between Phoenix and the United States and Mexican border is the growing metropolis of Tucson and Pima County. The area is home to nearly 1,000,000 people. Tucson's demographics reflect Arizona's diversity; 57% of Arizona's population is White, 32% is Hispanic, 3% is African American, and 4.4% is Native American.ⁱ

Arizona's poverty rate is above the national average. In Pima County, an estimated 15.6% of people live at or below the federal poverty level, which is \$20,650 for a family of four. An additional 21% of Pima county residents live under 200% of the federal poverty level. In Pima County, nearly 49,000 children live at or below the federal poverty level.

There is a strong relationship between poverty and hunger. In Arizona, health officials agree that differences in general prosperity are related to health disparities and hunger.ⁱⁱ Around the nation obesity and diabetes are on the rise and Arizona communities are barely below national averages for these growing epidemics. In Arizona, 12% of children aged 10-17 are overweight and 60% of the state's adult population is overweight or obese. Additionally 17% of the states population aged 18-44 has diabetes, with diabetes affecting larger percentages of older populations.

The national standard for hunger is described as food insecurity; an uncertainty about having enough food to meet a person's needs.ⁱⁱⁱ Arizona's levels of food insecurity exceed national levels. 2004-2006 data indicates that 13.1% of Arizona's population is food insecure, 4.3% of which have "very low food security," meaning they experience hunger, eating habits are disrupted and food intake is reduced.^{iv}

Hunger, food security, health and poverty are linked. Community Food Bank president and CEO Bill Carnegie points to this relationship saying that people with low-incomes "stretch their dollars by buying foods high in carbohydrates. The right foods are just too expensive." National evidence supports that healthy food costs more and that limited access to healthy food affects dietary choices of people with low-income.

To meet the hunger need in Tucson and Pima County, the Community Food Bank (CFB) was founded in 1972 with the intention that "*Through education, advocacy and the acquisition, storage, and distribution of food, we will anticipate and meet the food needs of the hungry in Pima County.*" As a 501 (c) (3) the CFB is supported overwhelmingly by private contributions which make up over half of its revenue. The CFB receives 18% its revenue from government grants and the remaining revenue comes from bequests, the CFB grocery store, and shared maintenance fees with agencies. One of the biggest contributions to the CFB is the time of hundreds of volunteers; over 35% of the time committed to carrying out CFB efforts is donated by volunteers.

The CFB started distributing 10,000 emergency food boxes in its first year and now distributes over 30,000 boxes a year and serves Pima, Cochise, Graham, Greenlee, and Santa Cruz county. Children comprise 40% of the population served by the CFB.

Through nearly 700 member agencies, the CFB distributes emergency food boxes to those who request them, Food Plus for senior citizens and WIC supplements for women and children. The CFB runs various childhood nutrition programs including Kids Club and Snak Paks.

The CFB is innovative in its approach to combating hunger. In 1997, the Community Food Bank developed the Community Food Security Center (CFSC) whose mission is to create access for all people at all times to healthy food. The CFSC does so by “by promoting, demonstrating, advocating for, and collaboratively building an equitable and regional food system, which supports food production and strengthens communities.” It operates a public garden education classes, a family advocacy program, an outreach program to faith communities, two farmer’s markets, a mobile market, an on-site demonstration garden, a 12-acre farm and sells vegetables from backyard gardeners. The Community Food Bank’s Community Food Security Center is now exploring the opportunity to facilitate Farm to School Programs. The Community Food Bank’s innovative community food security work and food distribution efforts make it an invaluable resource to the community.

Introduction to Farm to School



Farm to School refers to the promotion and use of foods grown by local farmers in meals and snacks in K-12 schools and related educational efforts to increase nutrition, health, and agricultural and food system literacy. ~ Doug Resh, Community Food Connections

Farm to School is an opportunity for local farmers to use schools as a direct market. Locally grown produce usually travels less than 150 miles compared to vegetables purchased wholesale from Mexico, California, or the Northeast, which may travel over 1,000 miles to reach the lunch tray. Farm to School programs reduce truck fuel consumption, improve the viability of the local farming economy, and increase vegetable consumption among children. Farm to School programs may include serving locally grown vegetables as snacks in the classroom or supplemental vegetables in a salad bar at lunch. Farm to School connects children with the source of their food through nutrition, health, and agriculture curriculum and provides students experiential learning opportunities through farm visits, gardening and recycling programs.

In Arizona, there are 10,000 farms and ranches with an average size of 2,610 acres. Lettuce production represents 14% of the state’s total farm receipts. Yuma, Arizona is the winter lettuce capitol of the world. The

top agricultural crop exports are vegetables, cotton, fruits and seeds. Arizona also ranks second nationally in its production of cantaloupe and honeydew melons. These large producers export produce out of the state and country and are not necessarily interested in selling to local school districts. The farmers interested in selling to direct markets usually harvest less than 100 acres and plant and harvest by hand using natural or organic methods. These farmers utilize markets such as restaurants, farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture programs, and institutions such as schools. Small scale farmers tend to grow a wide variety of crops and in smaller quantities. The Department of Arizona has created an Arizona-grown campaign to promote locally grown products.

Taste tests conducted by the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) concluded that students do not like to eat canned green beans or peas, and instead prefer fresh produce. According to the Procurement Manager for TUSD, the district, which serves 50,000 meals a day, will be purchasing more fresh produce from wholesalers. It is cheaper to purchase processed produce than to hire people to cut vegetables and fruit. TUSD purchases a variety of produce including shredded lettuce, apple slices, bagged baby carrots, cucumber slices, and celery sticks. The additional produce is made available on a cafeteria salad bar.

In December 2007, the Public Health Nutrition Journal published a study that noted the frequency of students' fruit and vegetable consumption increased significantly from 2.97 to 4.09 times daily after a salad bar was introduced at lunch.

The positive response to salad bars in schools may be a result of the children not having access to fresh produce at home. Children in low-income families have less access to fresh produce because of cost of vegetables or availability of a local grocery store or farmers market. Therefore, children of low-income families are particularly excited about eating fruits and vegetables.

In Tucson, the Sunnyside School District has a child sized salad bar in every school. TUSD has salad bars in all their middle and high schools and are piloting the program in their elementary schools. So far the response for the salad bar has been outstanding.

As more schools implement salad bars, there is an increased opportunity to stock the salad bar with locally grown produce. Locally grown produce supports the local farm economy and ensures the land remains in agricultural production, and creates opportunities for children to learn about local agriculture and nutrition. Serving locally grown food supports the community and improves the health of children.



St. John School's Salad Bar for Health Week

Community Food Bank's Farm to School Program

The Community Food Bank is uniquely posed to facilitate Farm to School relationships between area Food Service Directors and Arizona growers. The Food Bank operates two farmers' markets, a 12-acre farm, and a variety of innovative child nutrition programs. Bill Carnegie, CEO of the Community Bank stated, "The Community Food Bank is excited about this new opportunity to bring fresh vegetables to local students. We know that when children have increased access to these types of products that they will eat more servings thereby improving their eating habits and nutritional health."

Implementing Farm to School programs allow the Community Food Security Center and the Community Food Bank Farm to fulfill their mission to increase access of fresh produce to low-income families. Farm to School benefits the Food Bank by creating a positive publicity opportunity to showcase their innovative efforts to alleviate child hunger. The Food Bank can also receive grants for their participation in Farm to School programs.

Last year, the Community Food Security Center commissioned research with University of Arizona Masters of Public Health students to determine if farmers and Food Service Directors were interested in Farm to School programs. The reports noted significant interest from Food Service Directors and farmers. As a result, a Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow was invited to Tucson to explore the barrier and opportunities to implementing Farm to School programs.

Farm to School in Arizona

The Farm to School program is growing in Arizona. The National Farm to School organization is coordinating a regional network. Arizona is within the Southwest Region of the network. The Arizona Food Policy Council and Community Food Connections are uniting Arizona stakeholders to explore Farm to School opportunities in the state.

At the local level, Litchfield Elementary District operates the only active Farm to School program. According to the National Farm to School website:

All the ten schools (7 elementary and 3 middle) receive a farm to school program that incorporates purchasing from local farmers, in-class nutrition education, in-class snacks using local products, and farm tours. David Schwake, the Food Service Director purchases fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy and eggs directly from local farmers, or through distributors who source from local farmers.

In Spring 2007, Community Food Connections, in collaboration with the Community Food Security Center of the Community Food Bank, Tucson,



and the Arizona Department of Education led a statewide survey of school district Food Service Directors to understand the feasibility of establishing a farm to school program in Arizona.

St. John The Evangelist Elementary School's "Eat Well, Be Well" Health Week, January 14 through 18, 2008, had an all Arizona-grown salad bar at lunch. Health Week featured the Community Food Bank Mobile Market, energetic recess activities, agriculture education in the classroom, a community health fair, and dental health checks by Reach Out America. St. John's St. John School partnered with the Community Food Bank to purchase locally grown fruits and vegetables to serve during lunch. Students shared an Arizona-grown salad bar with parents, farmers, government officials, Tucson community members and local political leaders to draw attention to child health and obesity, the local agriculture economy, and healthy school lunch. Grant money is pending.

Models for Farm to School

Farm to School programs are coordinated in a variety of ways. Below are examples of how produce is ordered and logistics arranged for Farm to School programs throughout the country.

Government Agency. New Mexico's Department of Agriculture receives requests for produce from Food Service Directors, orders the produce from a variety of farmers and assists with logistics of delivery to the schools.

School or District. Some California schools and districts operate their Farm to School programs by hiring a person to collect the orders from the schools, procure the locally grown produce and assist with logistics of delivery.

Community Agency. Throughout the country, a variety of organizations have stepped in as facilitator of Farm to School. These agencies may facilitate Farm to School relationships and provide storage and/or transportation support. The agency may be directly involved with food procurement. The Tucson Community Food Bank is willing to act as the facilitator but will not procure food for each school.

Farm Cooperative. To sell produce, farmers join the cooperative. A Food Service Director calls the cooperative. The cooperative organizes the amount of produce requested from member farmers and may also process or deliver the produce. Farm to School Farmer Cooperatives exist in Florida.

It is recommended that Farm to School programs start small and then grown as funding, administration commitment, and logistics are smoothed. It is recommended to start with a snack program, once or twice a week. This exposes children to fruits and vegetables with an education component and may have fewer logistical challenges. As the program expands, it is recommended to add extra fruits and vegetables to the lunch menu. Finally, schools may be able to start a regular salad bar.

Arizona Food Service 101

School food service is complicated. A facilitator must understand how the school food service system works in order to identify barriers and opportunities to implementing Farm to School.

Option 1: Self-Operated. At each school a Food Service Director procures all the food, writes the menu, and maybe even cooks. Food Service personnel are usually school/district employees. In Tucson, St. John, Santa Cruz, and San Xavier Catholic Schools are all self-operated.

Option 2: Self-Operated – Central Procurement and Kitchen. Every school in the district submits their food procurement needs to the district. The District Purchasing Manager orders food for the entire district. The food is delivered to the central warehouse. Some produce may be delivered directly to the schools. A central kitchen prepares the food, and then delivers “heat and serve” meals. Food Service personnel are usually district employees. Tucson Unified School District operates this way.

Option 3: Managed: There is a variety of ways a kitchen can be managed. Some schools contract out the entire school lunch process to a large food service company. The company is paid by the district to create menus, order the food, deliver it as “heat and serve” or provide staff for meal preparation. These staff members receive their paycheck from the company, not the district. By law, a school administrator is responsible for ordering USDA commodity products. Many charter and affluent schools have managed kitchens.

Option 4: No food service. Many charter schools do not serve lunch. Some charter schools monitor what kind of food students can bring into the school.

Whether the Food Service Director is purchasing vegetables for an entire district or just one school, they usually make one phone call a week to order the exact amount and type of product to be delivered on a certain day. If the food service staff does not have enough of any item, they can usually put in a short order and have it delivered in less than twenty-four hours. If not, some Food Service Directors visit the local grocery store.

The National School Lunch program provides a certain amount of reimbursement dollars per meal consumed by a child whose family lives at a certain percentage of the federal poverty level. Based on the income of the child’s guardian, children receive their school meals at a reduce price or for free. Reimbursement rates for meals are higher for schools with 60% or more of their student population living near the federal poverty line. Many schools operate their entire school lunch program using the money from government’s National School Lunch meal reimbursement. Many school districts do not contribute additional funds to school meal programs. The money for kitchen equipment maintenance, staff salary, and extra produce must all come from these funds. As a result Food Service Directors are creative in making their money stretch and simply trying to make ends meet.



One way to make limited dollars stretch is to purchase vegetables from a wholesaler. In the Tucson area, charter, public, private, and a reservation schools that participate in the Arizona Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) obtain vegetables from a variety of sources. Schools on the FFVP program and Tucson schools order produce from wholesale, Arizona companies or have staff purchase go to a local discount store to purchase vegetables. In Tucson schools produce comes from Ron's wholesale produce, Costco, Food City, Safeway, Sodexo, Sysco, Willie Itule Wholesale Produce, Shamrock (an Arizona company), Rainbow Produce (based in Phoenix), Olsen's IGA, and Sam's Club.

Barriers to Implementing Farm to School Programs

A variety of barriers exist to starting Farm to School programs. Some of these include Food Service Directors not knowing local producers, food safety concerns, lack of staff or school facilities to handle large quantities of unprepared produce, lack of consistent supply, and delivery challenges. The following challenges are faced by Food Service Directors that have a commitment to supporting the local agriculture economy and ensuring children eat the freshest produce possible:

Local. Local can mean: "in the state," "within 150 miles," "farmer with acres under a certain number," "farms where vegetables are harvested and planted by hand or with minimal equipment," or "organic or naturally grown." Is an Arizona corporate tomato farm that exports around the world considered local?

Insurance. Farmers selling directly to a school must have a one million dollar insurance policy.

Cost. Food Service Directors are extremely financially limited. Produce that costs just cents above the wholesale price may be cost prohibitive. When local produce is in season, it may cost the same as wholesale produce. A Food Service Director can examine the school food procurement records to determine the time of year, the amount, and cost of produce and compare if the item can be purchased in season locally. Outside funding to start a Farm to School programs is not necessary. However, grants off set the start up costs such as kitchen equipment, educational curriculum, and staff time.

Additional Time and Effort. Food Service Directors are busy people. They are concerned about the time required to order and be available for a deliveries from multiple farmers.

Unit Confusion. Most companies that sell and distribute produce do so in units of boxes, crates, or palates while local farmers sell in pounds or bunches.

Raw Vegetable Preparation. It takes a bit of extra time to chop, cut, or mix fresh vegetables.



Salad Bar Monitoring. Food Service Directors may not have the extra staff to monitor a salad bar.

Payment. Farmers usually need to be paid at time of delivery or shortly thereafter, which can conflict with the schools or districts usual payment methods.



Delivery. Delivery may not be at the school but at another location, such as a Farmer's Market or Community Food Bank. Delivery to the school may not be possible. The delivery will not be daily.

Vegetables Options. In Arizona, it is not possible to have a full Arizona-grown salad bar all year. There is always the possibility that the produce will not arrive on time or cannot be harvested due to weather.

Nutrition Requirements. The National School Lunch program strictly monitors serving sizes of fruits and vegetables and nutritional content of a menu. The Farm to School program fits into the National School Lunch program. Food Service Directors need to ensure that all federal nutritional guidelines for serving size and menu content comply.

Limited Number of Farmers. In Arizona, local farmers are few in number, limited in production capabilities, and may not be dependable. Farmers are least available in the spring and summer to attend meetings.

Tools Needed to Facilitate Farm to School in Arizona

The Farm to School program is new in Arizona. Therefore, there are a variety of tools needed that would make it easier to facilitate Farm to School programs.

- A Direct Marketing to School Guide *for Farmers*.
- A Growers Directory (online) that can be updated regularly and would include a list of vegetables grown each season by each farmer. This has been attempted by a variety of parties but never consistently updated. This would require coordination with the Farm Bureau, Department of Agriculture, and local growers.
- An example contract between a farmer and a school.
- A list of produce most often served in Arizona school lunches to help Farmers know what items schools are interested in purchasing.
- A list of produce grown by season in Arizona.
- A cheat sheet of how different salad bar items meet the federal school lunch reimbursement and serving guidelines.
- A list of grant opportunities for starting small Farm to School projects.
- A Food Service to Farm Unit Conversion Sheet. Food Service Directors purchase in units of ounces, flats, boxes, and cases. Farmers sell in unites of pounds, bunches, and bags.
- A quick booklet that explains the daily jargon terms used by food service personnel for example: RFP, PO, Partake Sheet, managed, self-operated, distributor, wholesaler, etc.

- A quick booklet that explains Arizona health codes, food safety pertaining to farms, procurement laws, gleaning regulations, and federal nutrition programs that directly relate to Farm to School.
- Assistance in developing a system for buying from local producers.

Overcoming Barriers to Implementing Farm to School

Research conducted in Arizona in the Spring of 2007 confirms that Food Service Directors are interested in Farm to School and willing to overcome barriers. Thirteen of sixty-five Food Service Director respondents indicated that they had purchased locally produced food in the year preceding the survey. Locally purchased products included tomatoes, cucumbers, broccoli, apples, melons, and milk. Forty-two respondents expressed interest in connecting their school district to local producers. No respondents indicated they were not interested in connecting to local producers. Food Service Directors responded they are most motivated to use locally



grown food because it is fresher, and supports the local community and local producers. The survey noted that school districts would purchase local food products assuming the price and quality were competitive. Ten percent were willing to pay a higher price for local produce.

There are a variety of opportunities for Farm to School programs in Arizona. Below are some of the opportunities to start successful Farm to School programs.

Partnership Opportunities

The Department of Education is willing to work with Food Service Directors to stay within procurement laws and yet access locally grown produce.

Farm to School programs have the opportunity to partner with a variety of nutrition educators through the University of Arizona Extension.

The Community Food Bank is a resource for storage space, farmer relationships, and produce through the Community Food Bank farm. In the future, the Community Food Bank may be able to incorporate locally grown produce into their Child Nutrition programs.

The Food Policy Coalition for the state of Arizona is seeking ways to support the work of a Farm to School coordinator. The Food Policy Coalition is a resource for troubleshooting and an outlet for sharing success.

There are a variety of meetings to spread the word about Farm to School. These meetings include the Superintendent Meetings, Charter School Meeting, Head Start Parent Meetings, School Board Meetings, etc.

School Opportunities

Schools that have their own ice machines are at an advantage to start salad bars.

New programs have an advantage to start an evaluation process from the beginning of the project. This baseline can compare health and eating habit changes during the implementation of Farm to School.

Farm to School programs usually increase the number of children eating school lunch, therefore increasing revenue.

Schools with gardens or that have nutrition education classes are prime places to explore Farm to School. These schools likely already have health advocates within the school that pushed for these changes and will embrace the Farm to School program.

Famers

Phoenix and Tucson area farmers come into town and drop off produce at a variety of locations, including the Food Bank, Farmers Markets, and CSA location near the university. These farmers may be able to drop off produce at schools as well.

Some farms email a vegetable availability list for restaurants to use for ordering and could pass this information on to school for weekly ordering.

Case Study: St. John School “Eat Well, Be Well” Health Week

The barriers to Farm to School can be overcome with patience, open communication, and cooperation between farmers, school administration and Food Service Directors. Serving fresh, locally grown produce during school lunch has benefits beyond simply increasing fresh fruit and vegetable consumption. To understand these benefits, the St. John the Evangelist School in Tucson, Arizona decided to have an Arizona-grown salad bar during lunch for Health Week. This is their story:

St. John School has a self-operated food service kitchen. The Food Service Director cooks from scratch each day to serve 180 children, mostly Hispanic, living in the surrounding low-income neighborhoods. The school administration was enthusiastic about hosting an “Eat Well, Be Well” Health Week. Together, the Community Food Bank’s National Hunger Fellow and the school administration reviewed the wellness policy, identified community partnerships, and began addressing the barriers to serving locally grown food in school lunch. The Health Week included agriculture education in the classroom, interactive recess activities, salad bar, community health fair, and visits by a local dentist. Before Health Week, the National Hunger Fellow met with the food service director and school administration weekly for almost two months, attended a teacher meeting, and visited each classroom for ten minutes to introduce the theme of Health Week and talk about proper use of a salad bar.

Below are the common barriers to starting a Farm to School program and how those challenges were conquered.

Local. St. John School and the Community Food Bank defined local as producers in the Phoenix and Tucson area that harvest less than a few hundred acres.

Time and Effort. The National Hunger Fellow with the Community Food Bank did the job for the Food Service Director and called multiple farmers to learn what was in season, the price, and determine the amount needed. This took about an hour. Follow-up phone calls and emails were required. The farmers all had strong connections with the Community Food Bank and were enthusiastic to help. One solution to this challenge is to pay a staff member an extra hour a week to make the phone calls and have all the produce picked-up from one centralized location such as the Food Bank or Farmer’s Market.



Cost. A portion of the produce for Farm to School was donated by the Community Food Bank Farm. The rest of the produce was purchased. It cost over \$500 for the full salad bar for four days. However, the school purchased nearly forty pounds more lettuce than needed. The produce was paid for by the Community Food Bank, the school paid for ice and additional wholesale produce (apples, bagged lettuce, and baby carrots) in case we ran out of local produce. The salad bar equipment was borrowed from another school.

Payment. The bill was paid by the Community Food Bank and processed by our Farmer's Market manager who has already established a method of paying the farmers. In the future, the school would take on this responsibility.

Unit Confusion. The school's usual produce supplier sells vegetables in units of boxes, crates, or palates while local produce is sold in pounds or bunches. The National Hunger Fellow and Food Service Director attempted to convert the number of full sized carrots sold in bunches to pounds of baby carrots sold by the wholesaler. The estimate for carrots was correct, while the estimate for lettuce was way off. The mistake was costly.

Vegetable Preparation. Washing and cutting the produce was completed by 2-6 volunteers from the Food Bank and the school. It took several hours to wash the lettuce, broccoli, carrots, radish, and turnips, peel the carrots, and cut all the produce. In the future parents, volunteers, or the staff could be paid a few extra hours to address this labor challenge Schools can also pay their food service staff an extra hour or two to complete vegetable preparation.



Salad Bar Monitoring. Teachers and Food Bank volunteers monitored the salad bar. It was also suggested parent volunteers, local community members that support the school, recess attendants, school administration or student council members monitor the salad bar.

Delivery. Delivery required a volunteer to go to the Food Bank to pick up produce. It also required making two trips to the local CSA pick-up location, which operates after regular school hours.

Vegetable Options. In January, the school was able to purchase broccoli, spring mix salad, radishes, turnips, purple carrots, and apples, and oranges were gleaned from Tucson trees. Therefore, Food Service Directors should purchase locally when vegetables are in season.

Limited Number of Farms. The St. John Farm to School Health Week utilized four farms: the Community Food Bank Farm, Crooked Sky Farms, English Apples Farm, and Forever Yong Farm.

Media. Creating a video of farm to school would be an excellent opportunity to visually demonstrate the process and success of the program. Pictures from the event were published in the paper with a short caption.

As the challenges to implementing the Farm to School program were addressed, a variety of positive outcome emerged. These outcomes included:

- Reduced absenteeism during the week of the salad bar.
- Children who brought their lunch wanted to eat the salad bar too.
- Parents noted that their children were asking for fresh vegetables at home.

- The school administration committed itself to fundraisers to buy needed kitchen equipment.
- The school administration decided to implement elements of the wellness policy, such as having recess before lunch so the children will not rush their meal to go play outside.
- The children participated in agriculture education in the classroom lessons and asked questions such as “Do carrots come from the ground or the store?”
- The children asked the teachers and volunteers about the nutritional value of fruits and vegetables.
- The teachers noted the children were eager for lunch and took longer to eat their lunches.
- The food service staff noticed that there was a reduction in vegetables thrown away compared to a day when canned produce is served.
- The school cafeteria was decorated with images of healthy food, messages about exercise, and the children’s artwork about healthy lifestyles and eating.
- The teachers are excited to teach nutrition in the classrooms because of the children’s enthusiasm to learn about vegetables and fruit.
- Parents, politicians, city, county and state administrators visited the school to eat the salad bar with the children and were impressed with the school’s dedication to ensuring their children are healthy.
- The Diocese of Tucson is interested in funding the Farm to School program.
- The school developed partnerships with the Community Food Bank, local farmers, and other agencies that are interested in sustainable food systems.



All the barriers to implementing Farm to School can be overcome through cooperation between volunteers, food service staff, school administration, teachers, and the children. Our local food system can be strengthened by ensuring that farmers have access to schools as a direct market and children have access to fresh, healthy, local fruits and vegetables.

Tips for Initiating Farm to School Programs

As a facilitator begins the process of Farm to School, it is important to plan, plan, and plan. Rushing the process can result in an unstable program.

As the Farm to School Facilitator your job is to make Farm to School *easy* for farmers and Food Service Directors. Food Service Directors will not take this on unless they see it as a practical way to obtain food. It is also important for the Food Service Director to know that they are not alone. Some schools have created a Food Advisory Committee that helps with the logistics and additional labor of Farm to School.

Successful Farm to School programs incorporate parents, the school’s wellness policy committee, teachers, Food Service Directors and staff, administrators at the school and district, students, farmers, and community agencies.

Start with Food Service Directors



Before making your first phone call to a school, check out the school or district website. There will be valuable information posted regarding special programs such as the salad bar or cooking classes, names of food serve personnel, menus, and may hint if the school is managed by a large external company or self operated.

The only way to learn how a school's food service works is to call, try to set up an appointment, and enjoy the journey of being passed along the food service chain of command. If you are passed up the chain of command to an office, ask if there is a school cafeteria that you could visit during lunch time.

The best time to call a Food Service Director is early in the morning (before 8:00am) or after the lunch hours (around 1:00pm).

Food Service Directors are accustomed to people entering their kitchen to complain about the taste of the food or find faults with the way food is prepared and the functionality of their equipment. A facilitator should be prepared not to be warmly welcomed. Food Service Directors are NOT THANKED on a regular basis for their hard work. They are often underfunded, underappreciated by administration, and rarely feel integrated into the school. Farm to School is a fabulous way to invite administration to pay attention to the hard work of the Food Service Director and start a conversation about how the school lunch impacts every student in the school.

The Food Service Director is under tight budget constraints and are doing the best he/she can to provide nutritious meals to the children. Food Service Directors can quickly become defensive or elusive to the idea of "improving" their program. They would have already implemented improvements if they had the money or time. The term "improve" means that there is fault with the existing program. Some Food Service Directors will be the first to tell you that they dislike serving canned vegetables and they want to improve the quality of the food. Farm to School "enhances" an existing program or "increases" the healthy choices for students. Think in advance of words that are kinder than "improve."

Schools that have managed operations for labor or food procurement may be a bit elusive about their contract. Be patient and as you build trust the details of their operations and how Farm to School could fit within their contract terms will be explained to you.

Food Service Directors are very knowledgeable about health codes, federal nutrition programs, and procurement law. A Food Service Director that is hesitant to start a Farm to School program may try to use "expert" information to block opportunities to do Farm to School. Check regulations that a Food Service Director thinks block procurement of local food.

Be prepared for this comment: "If this program is so great, why aren't more schools doing it?" The honest answer: "You work so hard as a Food Service Director and Farmers are working hard to grow produce. You are both busy people. The opportunity is that you are both working towards the same goal of providing healthy, fresh food and breaking even or better. Sometimes it takes a community member to help bring you together."

Ask if the person who wrote the menu also procures the food. If not, it is important to have buy-in from the menu creator and the procurement managers.

Consistency is an issue for Food Service Directors. Make you that the Food Service Director knows that you cannot promise consistency and therefore the school must be flexible.

A Food Service Director may want to meet with the farmers on their land to learn about their challenges. Likewise, the famers may want to visit the school to see how their produce is stored and served to the children. Offer to arrange the meeting.

To build trust, spend a day or two job-shadowing a farmer and Food Service Director.



When speaking with a Food Service Director expect to have questions related to local food procurement (aka “Are there farmers?”), transportation and delivery of produce, payment for the food, and availability.

Ask lots of questions – Remember you are talking to a food procurement expert!

Next steps, involve the School Administration and Community

As the school begins the process of implementing Farm to School, it is important to establish priorities and identify already existing resources and relationships that will strengthen the program. Farm to School is much more than just eating fresh vegetables in the cafeteria. Therefore, planning committees may want to review how to incorporate nutrition education, physical fitness activities, farmer or farm visits and agriculture education in the classroom into the Farm

to School program.

At the initial meetings for Farm to School, it is important to start by talking about the local food system and define terms. Addressing terminology at the start can reduce conflict further in the process. Local can mean grown within 100 miles from the school or grown within the state or region. Local can also address the scale of the vegetable or fruit operations. For example, some schools will only buy from farms that grow on less than 100 acres and exclude vegetable growers that export to other states and Europe.

At the beginning stage it is valuable to review the wellness policy and look for ways that Farm to School supports the policy.

Like St. John, some schools may want to conduct a pilot of the program for a week or several months to work out the logistics. Pilot programs should invite as many people to participate as possible, so to create buy-in from all interested parties and ensure commitment to continue to the program.

Suggestions for a Facilitator

Always admit when you do not know the answer to a question. Write it down and promptly return a phone call with the correct information.

Be prepared to explain the research that children actually eat vegetables when served in school lunch! This is supported by the increasing number of schools starting salad bars at all educational levels.

Be prepared to talk about the number of local farmers, their names, what they grow, and your experience visiting their farms.

Procurement law is written by the Federal government, then the state writes procurement guidelines, and then the district writes procurement guidelines. The Federal guidelines always trump. You do not need to be a procurement law expert, but this is a critically important aspect of the Farm to School program. Take the time to learn the details of the procurement law.

Large school districts put everything to bid. This makes Farm to School more difficult as local farmers may not want to take part in a complicated bid process. However, ask to see the bid paperwork and how the bid process works. A dedicated farmer may be willing to bid.

Currently, the Arizona Department of Agriculture does not keep a record of small scale farmers. It is important to keep the Department of Agriculture interested in Farm to School and hopefully create a link between their work, small scale agriculture, and health of children.

Conclusion

*“In the long run, no nation is healthier than its children or more prosperous than its farmers.”
~ Harry S. Truman*

Farm to School creates an opportunity for children about local agriculture, meet farmers, eat healthy vegetables, and allows schools to support the local agriculture economy. Farm to School can strengthen community partnerships, integrate school lunch into the curriculum, and improve children’s healthy lifestyle choices. There are many barriers to overcome. However, communication, cooperation, and dedication to the health and education of students will create opportunities to overcome these barriers.



ⁱ All population numbers are from 2000 Census data.

ⁱⁱ AZ daily dispatch article

ⁱⁱⁱ USDA def: **Food insecure**—At times during the year, these households were uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food to meet the needs of all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources for food. Food-insecure households include those with *low food security* and *very low food security*.

^{iv} <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR49/ERR49.pdf>